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›Oil upon the waters‹: On the Creation of Light from Basil to Peter Lombard*

by GILES E. M. GASPER

Hexaemeral commentary, which focused on the six days of creation in the first Genesis creation narrative, is a curiously under-studied genre. While attention has been paid to such commentaries produced in the early church, this has rarely been from a longer perspective. The medieval contribution to the genre in particular has been neglected. Why this should be the case is suggested in comments by the author of practically the only survey dedicated to hexaemeral literature as a whole. In general, states F. E. Robbins:

As is the case with other classes of literary composition, so the Hexaemera tended to conform to certain types established by a few pioneers. Subsequent authors not only followed the general outlines that had been laid down by the greater writers, and reproduced their topics, but even copied their phraseology. Imitation is commoner in this branch of literature than in almost any other, and the majority of Hexaemera are consequently lacking in originality.¹

A tendency towards derivative writing and therefore to the conservative or stunted development of the genre may explain some of the lack of consideration given to the hexaemeron as a whole. Robbins, although noting that a great number of hexaemera were produced during the Middle Ages, reports their general character as unoriginal, unimaginative, irrelevant and redulous.² This is, however, to underestimate both the importance and the substance of the works produced in this period.³

* The author would like to thank for their help with this article: Nick Everett, Joe Goering, Andy Orchard, David Rollason, Johannes Zachuber, and especially Greti Dinkova-Bruun.

1 ROBBINS 1912, 1–2.

2 Three broad characteristics are identified by Robbins: 1) »eclecticism, the citation, comparison, and discussion of previously expressed opinions, rather than the formations of original views«, 2) »a constantly growing tendency to eliminate the abstraction of Augustinianism, and to present a more concrete exegesis, representing the successive creations as the steps in a physical process« and 3) »increased interest in more minute and sometimes irrelevant questions suggested by the phraseology of the Scriptures, or by science, pseudo-science, theology, angelology, demonology, and the like, in the discussion of which the authors display more pedantry and credulity than even their predecessors of antiquity«, ROBBINS 1912, 77.

3 This is not to suggest that Robbins entirely neglects the medieval hexaemeron: the departure of many medieval authors from Augustine is observed, and Robbins notes ›certain new developments‹ in the 12th century, that is, the explanation of creation as a continuous physical process and a renewal of interest in neo-platonism, ROBBINS 1912, 83. However, the medieval hexaemeron does not occupy Robbins over-much. Robbins's





The hexaemeron tradition in general was more creative than might at first be thought. What is offered here is a case-study which follows the interpretation of a peculiarly difficult passage for commentary, concerned with the action of light upon the waters after its first creation in Genesis 1:3. The passage will be traced from its original context in Basil's *Hexaemeron Homilies*, through his Latin translators and imitators, into the traditions of the early and high western medieval traditions, in particular Bede. In so doing three subjects will be approached, first the relationship between the hexaemeron commentary of Basil and that of Ambrose in the fourth century, second the reception of Patristic hexaemeral commentary in the medieval West, including translated versions of Basil's homilies from Greek into Latin, and third, the light this passage sheds on the nature of hexaemeron commentary in the Western medieval tradition. *Inter alia* the problems posed by the interpretation of the passage illustrate also the practices and puzzlement of a number of modern editors and translators. The passage has elicited discussion only in the context of editorial remarks.⁴ There is a good deal more to be said on the matter.

To start at the tail-end of the trail, in the mid-twelfth century, at Paris. Peter Lombard included treatment of the six days of creation in the second book of his *Sentences*, his great compilation of topics for theological discussion. In the course of debate on the nature of the first created light the Lombard includes the following comments:

THAT LIGHT WAS MADE WHERE THE SUN NOW SHINES, AND THAT IT COULD SHINE THROUGH THE WATERS. – AUGUSTINE, IN *ON GENESIS*: »But if it is asked where that light was made, since the abyss covered all the heights of the earth, it can be said that it was made in those parts over which now shines the daily light of the sun. And it is not strange that the light can shine through the waters, since these are often lit even by sailors; diving in the deep, they make light for themselves in the water by spouting oil from their mouths. And the waters were much less deep in

work is still the only general survey of hexaemeral literature covering the Middle Ages although a study by Robert Lethem, *LETHEM* 1999, does take a long view on a specific issue. Individual medieval hexaemera have received attention, a few quite extensively, and it is a genre that has attracted some recent scholarly interest, especially by Wanda Cizewski. Two leading examples are the hexaemera of Peter Abelard and Robert Grosseteste. Abelard's *Hexaemeron* was recently edited: *ABALARDUS Hexameron* which supersedes the earlier edition made by Romig: *ROMIG*, 1981. Specific studies of Abelard's *Hexameron* include: *CIZEWSKI* 1980 and *BUYTAERT* 1968. Grosseteste's hexaemeron has been edited: *GROSSETESTUS Hexameron* and translated: *GROSSETESTUS On the Six Days of Creation*. Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexameron* have also provoked recent interest: *HUGHES* 2005. Interest in early medieval hexaemeral writing is more limited: *BEDA On Genesis* a notable exception. The hexaemeron in the Middle Ages is included in general discussions of high medieval scientific knowledge such as *DALES* 1979. The scholarly attention as indicated does not do complete justice to the variety and volume of hexaemeral commentary in the High Middle Ages, and a new survey of the medieval hexaemeron, c. 1070–c.1270 is under preparation by G. Dinkova-Bruun and G. E. M. Gasper.

⁴ Robbins himself mentions Bede's use of the passage, but offers no comment, *ROBBINS* 1912, 80.





the beginning than they are now because they had not yet been gathered in one place.»⁵

No other comments are added to this, which is not unusual within Lombard's commentary. The broader scope of his inquiry at this point is the nature of the first day of creation, how it is to be measured and how, before the creation of the sun and moon, the phrase ›day and night‹ is to be taken. The nature of the first light, how lucent it was, and where it existed are important questions in this context. So too is the issue of whether that light would have been visible and effective, given that creation was at this point aqueous. These various aspects explain the context for the quotation, apparently from Augustine, of the activity of men with oil in their mouths.

Peter Lombard was not the only mid-twelfth century author to include the passage, and the analogy of men with oil in their mouths, as will be discussed below. However, the middle years of the twelfth-century do seem to represent the last point within medieval hexaemeral commentary where the analogy with men with oil in their mouths, variously identified, was introduced to attentive readership. Why the analogy should have been introduced at all is worth contemplating. In its own context it perhaps makes some sense. However, its appearance within Lombard's work might speak instead to its reputation as a difficult phrase. As Giulio Silano has pointed out, the *Sentences* are not a simple compilation and organisation of theological knowledge of the mid-twelfth century. Rather they represent something akin to a legal casebook of particularly difficult and contested opinions.⁶ To explore the origin and earlier history of this analogy is to see some reasons why this may have been the case. Peter Lombard attributes the analogy to Bede. This is not wholly surprising; Bede was, as Lombard's recent translator suggests, in all probability the ultimate source for the later medieval commentators, from the Carolingian period through to the twelfth century.⁷ However, the attribution was incorrect; the analogy does not begin with Bede but with Ambrose of Milan, and, possibly, Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century.⁸

5 PETRUS LOMBARDUS *Sentences* 2, Dist. 13, c.3 (66), 54–55; PETRUS LOMBARDUS *Sententiae*, Lib. II. Dist.13, c.3 (66), 390: ›Quod lux illa facta est ubi sol apparet, quae inter aquas lucere poterat. – Augustinus, *Super Genesim*: ›Si autem quaeritur ubi est facta lux illa, cum abyssus omnem terrae altitudinem tegeret, dici potest in illis partibus esse facta, quas nunc illustrat solis diurna lux. Nec mirum lucem in aquis posse lucere, cum etiam nautarum operatione saepius illustrentur; qui in profundum mersi, misso ex ore oleo aquas sibi illustrent; quae multo rariores fuerunt in principio quam modo sint, quia nondum congregatae fuerant in uno loco«.

6 PETRUS LOMBARDUS *Sentences* 1, xix–xxvi.

7 PETRUS LOMBARDUS *Sentences* 2, 13.3 (66), 55, n. 1.

8 In the discussion that follows the analogy of men with oil in their mouths is examined indicatively through the works of prominent and accessible authors. The discussion makes no particular claim to a comprehensive listing of all Genesis commentaries, including those as yet unedited, as for example the list made available by Michael Gorman, GORMAN *Commentaries*.





In the course of remarks on the action of light in his second hexaemeral homily Basil of Caesarea declares that there should be no surprise as to the illuminating power of light. For, he points out:

The divine word gives every object a more cheerful and a more attractive **appearance, just as when men in deep sea pour in oil, they make the place about themselves clear.**⁹

The context for Basil's observation on the clarifying properties of oil on deep water is the purpose and consequence of the creation of light, as was for Peter Lombard later, although to different ends. Light, created by the first word of God, 'made darkness vanish, dispelled gloom, illuminated the world, and gave to all beings at the same time a sweet and gracious aspect'.¹⁰ It is the beauty of light that Basil expounds, a beauty intrinsic to light, but also as a result of its illumination of the rest of creation: through light the heavens appeared in beauty. Basil also comments on the action of light: the air was made light, and in an instant it lighted up the whole world. The illustration of oil making deep waters clear is used therefore to support a line of thought on the revelatory quality of light: it gives creation its beauty and its attraction.

Basil's line of thought on this matter appears to have been followed by Ambrose in his own work on the six days of creation, the *Exameron*. Ambrose's hexaemeral discussion, which remained one of most enduringly popular works, drew considerable inspiration from Basil.¹¹ Basil's hexaemeral homilies were delivered in the 370s; Ambrose delivered his probably in Holy Week of 387. The question of the precise relationship between the two works has traditionally been a subject of some debate.¹² A long-standing criticism of Ambrose's commentary holds that it was derivative from Basil, and, as a result unoriginal in its insights and observations. This criticism extends back as far as the later fourth century and Jerome's remarks that Ambrose's *Exameron* avoided using

9 BASILIUS *Hexameron* Giet, 2.7, English translation from BASILIUS *Hexameron* Jackson. The original text reads: 'Ὅσπερ γὰρ οἱ ἐν τῷ βυθῷ ἐνιέντες τὸ ἔλαιον, καταφάνειαν ἐμποιῶσι τῷ τόπῳ'. The emphasis in the quotation is my own. Basil's use of this phrase perplexed his nineteenth century English translator for the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, Blomfield Jackson, who expressed his incredulity at the phrase, and remarked in a footnote that the illustration hardly seemed to serve Basil's point at all. Jackson concluded his remarks with additional references to Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis* and Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*, to elucidate the source of the phrase. The latter is not particularly germane to the illustration used by Basil, concerning as it does the merits and demerits of salt and fresh water for the washing of clothes (PLUTARCHUS, *Quaestiones convivales*). Reference to Pliny is more germane and will be outlined in detail below.

10 BASILIUS *Hexameron* Giet, 2.7.

11 MOORHEAD 1999, 213–214.

12 AMBROSIIUS *Hexameron*, vi.





Origen but instead expressed the views of Hippolytus and Basil.¹³ Ambrose, according to Jerome, added nothing new.

On the subject of the creation of light Ambrose does indeed follow the basic outline of Basil's work, but with differences of emphasis. Light is made so that the beauty of creation might be seen, and on this point Ambrose is more eloquent than Basil. The action of light is spoken of in similar terms, although without Basil's more extended comments on the air, light and aether.

Suddenly, then, the air became bright and darkness shrank in terror from the brilliance of the novel brightness. The brilliance of the light which suddenly permeated the whole universe overwhelmed the darkness and, as it were, plunged it into the abyss.¹⁴

The immediacy of light, and the connection between the uttering of God's command ›Let there be light‹ and the birth and action of light, is of particular import for Ambrose. There was no distinction between the word and the action, the latter was already fulfilled in the former.

This is the context in which Ambrose introduces what was presumably his version of the ›oil on the waters‹ analogy used by Basil:

Quando miramur si deus locutus est lucem et caliganti mundo emicuit, quando si quis inter aquas mersus oleum ore miserit, clariora faciat ea quae profundis tegebantur occultis.
[Why do we marvel at the fact that God said ›light‹ and flashed forth brilliance on a darkling world, when **if a person immersed in water should emit oil from his mouth, he would make more visible all that which is hidden in the deep of the sea.**] ¹⁵

The difference between this and Basil's words is clear: Ambrose speaks of emission of oil from the mouth, compared to Basil's statement that oil was poured onto the water. Was Ambrose paraphrasing Basil, embellishing his statement, or using a different example altogether? And in any case what were the possible sources for both authors?

Comparison with the translations of Basil's text made in Late Antiquity suggests that Ambrose's reference to emission of oil from the mouth does, indeed, derive from a different source, and not from Basil. A Latin translation of Basil's homily was made around 400 by Eustathius who was active in Rome and

13 HIERONYMUS *Epistolae*, 84.7 (CSEL 55); ROBBINS 1912, 58, states that ›as an independent work the *Hexameron* has little value‹, see MOORHEAD 1999, 73: ›When Jerome, who often criticized Ambrose for lack of originality, claimed that the *Exameron* simply followed the opinions of Hippolytus and Basil, he was unfair, for when this work is compared with his earlier commentaries it is clear that by the time he wrote it Ambrose had found his own voice. In particular, he turns away from the comparatively literal interpretation of the text offered by Basil‹. For a more detailed analysis of Jerome's attitudes towards Ambrose, especially regarding translations, see: OBERHELMAN 1991.

14 AMBROSII *Hexameron*, 1.9.

15 AMBROSII *Exameron*, 1.9.





the south of Italy.¹⁶ Thus it is quite conceivable that the translator could have known Ambrose's work as well. He rendered Basil's words as follows:

Nam sicut hi qui olei aspergine perspicuum sibi profundum maris efficient, sic rerum conditor deus, sui oris adflatu, iocunditatem lucis mundi repente prae-buit.

[For just as these men who by sprinkling oil will make the depth of the sea visible to themselves, so God the author of things, through the breathing of his own mouth, gave suddenly the delight of the light of the world.]¹⁷

Eustathius does not follow Basil absolutely, but equally makes no mention of men submerged in deep water and emitting oil from their mouth.

Basil's *Hexaemeron* was also translated into Syriac, a translation that was then used as the basis for a translation into Armenian. In the section on light from the second homily, the Syriac translator seems to have followed Basil quite closely: light once created spread joy, because it revealed the glory of creation. The Syriac translator also copied faithfully Basil's analogy for the pleasing action of light:

Just as those who descend into the depths of waters, from the light of the oil which they cast before them attain the places which they seek under the water by its light; likewise the creator of all bestowed his majestic word onto the world by his nod, and set in it the light of his grace for those that enter it.¹⁸

The Syriac version does not seek to add anything to Basil's statement or to offer any explanation of why it might be apt. There is perhaps an additional understanding that those so doing were descending to the depths which is not clear in Basil, or for that matter in Eustathius. However, oil in this version is cast before those who descend. In conclusion, Basil's text and its late antique translations suggest that oil being emitted from the mouth in the context of creation of light rests solely with Ambrose. But whence does Ambrose derive this notion? It appears that his source here is Pliny the Elder and his observations on divers. There is, strictly speaking, nothing in Ambrose's text that refers to diving and divers, but they are, perhaps, suggested by the context. Pliny, in book two of the *Natural History*, in a section devoted to water, observes that:

Iam omnes ... omne oleo tranquillari, et ob id urinates ore spargere quoniam mitiget naturam asperam lucemque deportet.

[Again everybody is aware ... that all seawater is made smooth by oil, and so divers sprinkle oil from their mouth because it calms the rough element and carries light down with them.]¹⁹

16 ALTANER 1940, 161–70.

17 EUSTATHIUS *Ancienne version latine*, 2.7, 27.

18 BASILIUS *Hexaemeron* Syriac, 25, ll. 32–6.

19 PLINIUS *Historia naturalis*, 2.106.





Pliny is definite in his reference to divers [*urinates*] and what they intended to achieve by taking down oil in their mouths. The oil once released orally created calm allowing light to penetrate further down without being refracted by the water.

The account of divers acting in this way is, it would appear, confined to Pliny. Ancient authors gave descriptions of pearl and coral divers, famous military exploits involving divers and Aristotle reflects on the mechanics of diving, the tools for prolonging submarine activity and its physiological effects on the ear along with the remedial actions adopted, but no others refer to the anti-refracting use of oil.²⁰ Given the similarity between the accounts of Ambrose and Pliny, the former's use of the latter as a source for his reference to the emission of oil seems to be a reasonable suggestion.²¹ One other ancient reference to diving relevant here is found in Philostratos, whose *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, completed in 217, has the following account of pearl divers. Diving into deep seas off the island of Selera in the Red Sea,

20 PAULY 1931, 857–59.

21 The trail left by various editors and translators on the identification of Ambrose and Basil's sources is intriguing. As note 9 above recorded, Blomfield Jackson suggested Plutarch and Pliny for Basil's source in his English translation of 1895. Amongst the critical editions of Ambrose's *Exameron*, Migne's *Patrologia Latina* contains no reference material (AMBROSIIUS *Exameron* Migne 14, 154A), and Schenkl's AMBROSIIUS *Exameron*, 36 gives only a reference to Bede's *Commentary on Genesis*, where the same analogy is used, as outlined below. Amongst translations the English translation made by Savage includes few references anyway and none for this passage (AMBROSIIUS *Hexameron*). Two twentieth-century Italian translations offer some comments on the passage. AMBROSIIUS *Opere* Coppa, 147n, notes that: ›L'esempio, tratto da un più sobrio accenno di Basilio, Hex. 2.7 sarà a sua volta riferito da Beda Hex. 1. è da dubitare che i tre Padri, o le loro eventuali fonti, ne abbiano mai verificato la fondatezza [The example, treated in a more sober manner in Basil Hexameron 2.7 was in turn referred to by Bede Hexameron (In Genesis) 1 and it seems doubtful that the three Fathers, or their eventual sources, got to the bottom of its meaning.]‹. A decade later G. Banterle in his Latin/Italian edition (AMBROSIIUS *Opere* Banterle 172, n. 1) simply reported in a footnote the Greek text of Basil with the comment ›noi non ne sappiamo nulla [we know nothing about this]‹. Schulte's nineteenth-century German translation of Ambrose for the *Kirchenväter*-series (AMBROSIIUS *Ausgewählte Schriften* Schulte 45) introduces the word ›divers‹ into the analogy: ›Kann doch schon ein Taucher im Wasser, wenn er aus dem Munde Öl ausfliessen lässt, die Dinge, welche die verborgene Tiefe deckte, einigermaßen aufhellen‹ [›For a diver in water can certainly do so, when he releases oil from his mouth, the depth of the sea is revealed.‹], but does not cite any authority for the addition. With Giet's edition of Basil's *Hexameron homilies* matters become a little circular when he explains Basil's example of pouring oil onto the waters by recourse to Ambrose's text. He translates Basil's phrase as follows: ›Comme <les plongeurs> au fond de l'eau soufflent de l'huile pour faire, en ce lieu, pénétrer la clarté ... › (BASILIUS *Hexameron* Giet, 173). ›Plongeurs‹ [›divers‹] is added to the translated text by Giet on the authority of Ambrose. He explicitly states that in doing so he is following the interpretation of Ambrose: ›Nous suivons l'interprétation de saint Ambroise ›si quis inter aquas mersus oleum ore emisit‹. (BASILIUS *Hexameron* Giet, 173, n. 1). There is an assumption here that Ambrose was following Basil to the letter, which, as suggested above, may not have been the case. In his lengthy study comparing the two texts R. Henke offers no commentary at all on the passage at issue (HENKE 2000).





The inhabitants watch for a calm day, or they themselves render the sea smooth,
and this they do by flooding it with oil ...²²

They then dive down to secure their object. There is however nothing in this account directly connected with the amelioration of light-conditions below the surface; the emphasis is rather on the placid aspect of the sea.

It is possible, although perhaps not likely, that Basil's comment was derived from knowledge of Pliny's text. It is possible, and perhaps more likely, that he rather made reference to the work of Philostratos, which does concern oil used to calm deep water. Or, it may be the more prosaic case that he simply described common or observed practice. Whatever the case it seems less likely that in this instance Ambrose was following Basil. In fact, the example of oil on the waters may be additional evidence of Ambrose's independence from Basil.

Although possibly independent in their application of the analogy for the action of oil upon water, Ambrose and Basil still employed it in the same broad context. That context shifts in the case of Bede, the next to use the story in ways that seem even more confused and confusing. He repeats it twice, first, in his discussion of the six days of creation in his commentary *On Genesis* written either as early as 703–709 or as late as 717–718, and, second, in the *De temporum ratione*, written in about 725, although Bede seems to have started it in about 722.²³ As the preface to the Genesis commentary makes clear, Bede knew both the translation of Basil by Eustathius and Ambrose's *Exameron*, although the Father to whom he owes most is Augustine:

Many persons have said many things about the beginning of the book of Genesis, in which is described the creation of this world, and they have left to posterity many monuments of their ability. Chief among them, as far as my humble self has

22 PHILOSTRATOS, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 3. 57.

23 The dating of the hexaemeral portion of Bede's *On Genesis* is contested. Kendall in his translation of *On Genesis* outlines the arguments clearly: BEDA *On Genesis* 40–53. The arguments turn on the respective dates for the two versions of commentary that Bede produced; the first and shorter was a commentary on the first three chapters of Genesis, whereas the second and longer one combined the first with three extra books commenting on chapters 4–21. The commentary on the six days from the first version was also issued separately. C. W. Jones in his introduction to his edition of the text (BEDA *In principium Genesis*) proposed that the hexaemeron commentary dated to 703–709, with the rest of the shorter commentary written later, about 725, and that the longer version dates to some point between 725 and 731 (the date of the deposition of the dedicatee, Bishop Acca of Hexham). Kendall proposes an overall period of 709–731, the period of Acca's episcopacy, and a date of 717–718 for the shorter commentary, c. 720 for book two of the longer version and c. 722–725 for the completion of books three and four (BEDA *On Genesis*, 45). Either way, the hexaemeral part of *On Genesis* pre-dates the *De temporum ratione*. There are still relatively few discussions of Bede's hexaemeral commentary. See FOX 1997 and JONES 1969–1970, 115–198, in addition to BEDA *On Genesis* (esp. 28–36) and BEDA *In principium Genesis* as described above. For the *De temporum ratione* see BEDA *De temporum ratione* and BEDA *Reckoning*, xvi, n. 4.





been able to learn, are Basil of Caesarea whom the translator Eustathius turned from Greek into Latin, Ambrose of Milan and Bishop Augustine of Hippo.²⁴

That Bede made use of both Eustathius/Basil and Ambrose is demonstrated in his reference to oil on the waters. In the Genesis commentary it is Ambrose who supplies the reference.

Bede, <i>In Genesim</i> , 1	Ambrose, <i>Exaameron</i> , 1.9
<i>Nec mirandum nobis diuina operatione lucem in aquis posse resplendere, cum et hominum operatione constet eas saepius inlustrari, nautarum uidelicet qui in profundo maris demersi, emisso ex ore oleo, perspicuum sibi hoc ac lucidum reddunt. Si enim homo talia per oleum sui oris potest, quantum Deus per Spiritum oris sui creare posse credendus est ...</i> ²⁵	<i>Quando miramur si deus locutus est lucem et calignanti mundo emicuit, quando si quis inter aquas mersus oleum ore miserit, clariora faciat ea quae profundi tegebantur occultis.</i> ²⁶
It should not be amazing to us that light in the waters can be resplendent through divine operation, when it should be evident that even by human operation waters are illuminated quite frequently. For example, by the operation of sailors, who, submerged in the depth of the sea, render it visible and clear by emitting oil from their mouth. For if a man can do such a thing through oil from his mouth, how much more we have to believe that God can create through the spirit of his mouth.	Why do we marvel at the fact that God said ›light‹ and flashed forth brilliance on a darkling world, when if a person immersed in water should emit oil from his mouth, he would make more visible all that which is hidden in the deep of the sea.

24 BEDA *On Genesis*, Praefatio, 65. Kendall in n. 2 records that ›I have found no evidence that Bede, while working on *On Genesis*, had access to any of the works of Basil except Eustathius's translation of the *Hexaameron*‹. This seems eminently sensible, but, as Kendall points out, it stands counter to the statement by M. L. W. Laistner that ›he [Bede] quotes from Basil's *Hexaameron*, though not in the Latin version of Eustathius‹ LAISTNER 1931, 161. Laistner's statement is in the context of a discussion of Bede's knowledge of Greek. It is possible that Bede had access to Basil's work in Greek.

25 BEDA *In principium Genesis* I.i.3 (my translation). Kendall (BEDA *On Genesis*, 74 n. 29) identifies Ambrose as the source, and points out that in the *De temporum ratione* Bede makes use of the alternative version of Eustathius/Basil. He then notes that ›both versions derive ultimately from Pliny *N[atural] H[istory]* 2.106.234‹. As the discussion above indicates, there is more to the identification of the passage than this.

26 AMBROSE, *Exameron*, 1.9.





However when it came to chapter five of the *De temporum ratione*, entitled *De die*, Bede's citation comes from Eustathius.

Bede, <i>De temporum ratione</i> , 5	Eustathius/Basil, <i>Hexaemeron homilies</i> , 2.7
<i>Quod si cui videtur incredulum me- atus aquarum luminis esse capaces, videat opera nautaurum, qui olei as- pergine perspicuum sibi profundum maris efficiunt, et intelligat rerum conditorem Deum multo amplius sui oris afflatu quantamlibet aquarum profunditatem illustrare potuisse ...</i> ²⁷	<i>Nam sicut hi qui olei aspergine perspicuum sibi profundum maris efficiunt, sic rerum conditor deus, sui oris adflatu, iocunditatem lucis mun- di repente praeiuit.</i> ²⁸
But if it seems incredible to anyone that passages of water are capable of holding light, he should observe the activity of sailors, who through sprinkling of oil make the depth of the sea clear for themselves, and he should understand how much more thoroughly God, the crea- tor of the world, could illuminate whatever depths of water however so great so much further by the breath of his mouth ...	For just as these men who by sprin- kling oil will make the depth of the sea visible to themselves, so God the author of things, through the breathing of his own mouth, gave suddenly the delight of the light of the world.

Thus Bede uses both Ambrose and Eustathius/Basil in two treatises, possibly written closely together, possibly some twenty years apart, to make the same point, despite the fact that they do not say exactly the same thing. He was evidently aware of the difference since his sources are followed scrupulously: in the Genesis commentary, as in Ambrose, oil is emitted from the mouth of those in the deep, in the *De temporum ratione* it is sprinkled into the deep.

Why Bede should change his sources between the two treatises is more puzzling. Although he knew both Eustathius/Basil and Ambrose at the time of the Genesis commentary, he followed the latter. A possible explanation is that, on further reflection, he found Eustathius/Basil more explicable and adopted it for his later work, perhaps in this process silently criticising and judging his Patristic sources. This is entirely in keeping with his practice in other writings. In his *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, dated to 709–716, for example, Bede struggles to reconcile information in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* and Paul's Letter to the Galatians over the length of time for which Peter was in Rome.

²⁷ BEDA *De temporum ratione*, c. 5. Also translated in BEDA *Reckoning*, c. 5, 22.

²⁸ EUSTATHIUS, *Ancienne version latine*, 2.7.





Jerome's dating is altered in minor respects but his broader narrative is maintained.²⁹ Bede's respect for his authoritative sources was not unquestioning.³⁰

The commentary on Acts also demonstrates that Bede did revise his opinions on his own works and that he became more critical of others as he grew older. Near the end of his life he wrote an extensive *Retractatio in Actus Apostolorum*, correcting errors, defending his interpretation and adding new material.³¹ An example of his critical tone, again applied to Jerome, is to be found in the identity of the apostle Jude: ›... the same man who in the gospels is called Thaddeus. *He was sent to Edessa, to Agbar the King of Osroena, as The Ecclesiastical History has handed it down*‹.³² Originally, Bede quoted Jerome with reference to the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Eusebius. By the time the *Retractatio* was written, he had checked his information more closely, looking at the *Historia* and discovering that there were two Thaddeus's and that Jude was not the one sent to Edessa. He remarks in his own defence, that:

Non mihi imputandum errorem reor, ubi auctoritatem magnorum sequens doctorum, quae in illorum opusculis inueni, absque scrupulo suscipienda credidi.

[I do not think that error should be imputed to me when, following the authority of the great doctors, I believed that I should adopt without scruple what I found in their writings.]³³

It may be the case that the dropping of Ambrose for Eustathius/Basil in the *De temporum ratione*, also a later work, came from a similar impulse.

That Bede may have had some difficulty in interpreting Ambrose and Eustathius/Basil is perhaps indicated also in the additions he made. Bede refers explicitly in both cases that those engaged in spreading oil, whether from their mouths or no, were sailors. Neither of the two original texts mentions sailors. That Ambrose was probably referring to divers is clearer if taken in conjunction with Pliny (his likely source). Bede did have some familiarity with Pliny, referring to his ›most delightful book, the *Natural History*‹ in the *De temporum ratione*.³⁴ He did not, however, know Pliny's work in its entirety but through a selection of books: 2, 3–7, 28, 30, 35 and 37.³⁵ There was an an-

29 BEDA *Acts*, 15. 2 and n. 1, 133.

30 This applies also to scripture, especially in the context of literal exegesis. An example highlighted by Kendall exemplifies the care with which Bede discusses the age of Shem (BEDA *On Genesis*, 3.11.10, 238–240, and earlier comments by Kendall at 5), born either when Noah was 500 or 502. Bede attributes the difference between the two passages of scripture that led him to notice this situation, to a desire on the part of the author of Genesis (Moses) to tidy up in the latter passage what carelessness had caused in the former. Kendall emphasises the importance of literal interpretation to Bede and the detailed analysis to which he subjected scripture: ›minor discrepancies are sometimes artfully explained, but never ignored‹.

31 BEDA *Acts*, xxiii.

32 BEDA *Acts*, 1.13.

33 BEDA *Acts*, n. 9, 24. BEDA *Retractio Actus Apostolorum*.

34 BEDA *De temporum ratione*, c. 27.

35 BEDA *Reckoning*, lxxxii. Wallis notes that ›... Bede's use of Pliny is oddly spotty‹.





thology of Pliny's works current in eighth-century England, but this does not appear to have been the one known to Bede since it includes book 18 which he never cites.³⁶ The edition of Pliny known to Bede was, nevertheless, likely to have been incomplete and the lacunae might have included the section of Book II which concerns divers. It is otherwise surprising, given the care lavished by Bede on his sources and the particular attention paid to Pliny in the *De temporum ratione*, that he would make no connexion at all between the Basil/Eusthatus and, earlier, the Ambrose, passages, and Pliny's observations.

A further question must be asked as to whether or not the connexion to divers would have meant anything to Bede anyway. It is difficult to conceive of the shallow-water divers of the Mediterranean described by Philostratos, Pliny and perhaps by Ambrose, having a much of a place in eighth-century Northumbria.³⁷ Bede probably did not know of Mediterranean Sea divers or their practice of carrying oil in their mouths as they descended to the deep. He may even have been confused by the practice, as reported by Basil and Eusthatus, of simply spreading oil on the surface of the sea in order to make clear the deep beneath.

However, a more general question of Bede's understanding of his authoritative Patristic sources is opened by this example. He did on occasion acknowledge difficulties in understanding the illustrations used by his Patristic masters and in imagining the Mediterranean world of the fourth century in the Northumbrian world of the eighth century. It is noticeable that in the course of his exegetical work Bede uses examples from his own society, which is natural enough, given the didactic purpose of his writings. The commentary on Acts provides a good case, this time in the commentary on 27.15, in which the ship carrying Paul to Rome is caught in a tempest. The sailors dragged anchors to prevent the ship crashing on the Syrtis banks. Bede remarks that:

Ex quo ostenditur quia funibus a medio latere navis utriusque circa eiusdem anteriora demissis anchoras his quae traherentur adiunxerunt, sicut et in nostro, id est, in Britannico mari refrenandae navis post tergum molaria saxa subiungere solent.

[From this it is shown that they lowered ropes from the middle of both sides of the ship and around its foremost parts, and to these they attached anchors which were dragged along, just as in our, that is, the British sea, they customarily tie millstone-sized stones behind the stern, so as to hold a ship back.]³⁸

36 BEDA *Reckoning*, lxxxii–lxxxiii.

37 Examples of diving anywhere in Anglo-Saxon England are hard to come by: Beowulf dives into the Mere in pursuit of Grendel's mother: ›After these words the Weather-Geat prince / dived into the Mere – he did not care / to wait for an answer – and the waves closed over / the daring man. [Æfter þæm wordum Weder-Gēata lēod / efste mid elne, nalas andsware / bīdan wolde; brim-wylm onfēng / hilde-rince]: ANON *Beowulf* ll. 1492–95; ANON *Beowulf* Alexander, 98. But Beowulf is mere-diving rather than sea-diving and engaged upon his fantastical journey to the realm of Grendel's mother.

38 BEDA *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, 27.15; transl. BEDA *Acts*, 187.





The acknowledgement is even plainer in the commentary on the Song of Songs:

In quo opere lectorem ammonedo, ne me superfluum iudicet, qui de natura arborum, sive herbarum aromaticarum, quae in hoc uolumine plurimae continentur, iuxta quod in libris antiquorum didici, latius explanare uoluerim. Feci namque hoc non arrogantiae studendo, sed meae meorumque imperitiae consulendo, qui longius extra orbem, hoc est in insula maris oceani nati et nutriti, ea quae in primis orbis partibus, Arabiae dico et India, Iudaea et Aegypto geruntur, non nisi per eorum qui his interfuere scripta nosse ualemus.

[I beg the reader not to judge it superfluous for me to explain rather fully the nature of trees or of aromatic herbs, many of which are contained in this volume, according to what I have learned in the books of ancient writers. This I have done, not for arrogant display, but with due regard for the inexperience of myself and my people, who, born and reared far beyond the world, that is, on an island of the Ocean Sea, are unable to know about the things in the first parts of the world, I mean Arabia and India, Judea and Egypt, save through the writings of those who have been there.]³⁹

The difference Bede points out with respect to the world he knew from experience, and that which he knew through reading, probably included also the passages from Basil and Ambrose.

It is worth noting too that Bede puts the illustrations of light and oil to slightly different purpose than his Patristic forebears. Although Ambrose adds the emission of oil from the mouth to Basil's text, the exegetical point for both authors is the same. Light reveals what had previously lain hidden in darkness. Basil in particular stresses the beauty of the light. Bede on the other hand places his emphasis on the place of the creation of light in the context of time. This is obvious enough in the *De temporum ratione*, where the question is of day and night, and especially of how day and night can be measured before the sun, the moon and the stars have been created. This question is indeed addressed by Basil as well, and Bede follows his suggestion that the spreading forth and withdrawing of this first light, as it traversed the world, created the days. In the commentary on Genesis the question of light's first creation is connected, as it is in the *De temporum ratione* also, with the issue of where it was created and the structure and composition of the abyss, the heaven and the earth. In both cases Bede observes, where his Patristic authorities do not, that human ingenuity in using oil to make clear the depths shows how much greater was God's power in creating the world.

It was, presumably, the authority of his sources that led Bede to include the oil in the mouth analogy. As he states in the preface to the *De temporum ratione*, he is one of those who 'follow in the footsteps of the Fathers [*nobis*

39 BEDA *In Cantica Cantorum*, 180; see also: JONES 1969–1970. In the context of Bede's scientific writings, specifically on tides. M. Stevens observes that '... it is one thing to receive a tradition from the Mediterranean world on the continent or in Anglo-Saxon England, quite another to understand it', STEVENS 1985, 7.





patrum sequentibus].⁴⁰ Authority alone does not, perhaps, tell the whole story, for Bede was both selective and critical of his patristic sources, albeit reverently and carefully. Within the context of hexaemeral writing, his discussion of the second day of creation including the nature and the composition of the firmament and the waters below and above presents a similar case-study of an encounter with a perplexing subject, where Patristic authority was divergent.⁴¹

It was the authority of Bede in the following century, and beyond, that ensured the copying of the image of oil being emitted from the mouth. It is repeated in the Genesis commentaries of Hrabanus Maurus and Angelomus of Luxeuil. Hrabanus (c. 780–856), Abbot of Fulda and Archbishop of Mainz, simply repeats Bede's phrases on the unnecessary marvelling at the action of light in the water. Angelomus adds a little commentary of his own. Both Carolingian authors quote Bede's Genesis commentary rather than his *De temporum ratione*. Three major commentaries from Angelomus survive, on Genesis, Kings and the Song of Songs.⁴² The additional commentary on the passage concerning oil in the waters is to point readers to Bede: ›*Lege Hexaemeron Bedae, moderni doctoris, si ita volueris*. [Read the Hexaemeron of Bede, a modern teacher, if you wish to know so].⁴³

The next point at which the references to, or citations of, the passages from Basil and Ambrose occurs is in the mid-twelfth century. They are made in the context of glosses on Genesis, Andrew of St Victor's literal commentary on Genesis and in works such as Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. It is possible that both Andrew and Peter were alerted to the passage about men with oil in their mouths from the *Glossa Ordinaria*:

Si autem queritur ubi est facta cum abyssum omnem terrae altitudinem tegeret patet qui in illis partibus quas nunc illustrat solis diurnal lux. Nec mirum lucem in aquas posse lucere cum etiam nautarum operatione sepius illustrantur; qui in profundo mersi misse ex ore oleo aqueo sibi illustrant. Quae tunc multo rariores quis sint modo facere in principio quia nundum congregatione in uno loco.⁴⁴

40 BEDA *De temporum ratione*, c. 5.

41 BEDA *In principium Genesis*, 1.6–8. At the end of his discussion of the second day Bede quotes ›St Clement's History‹ (the Ps-Clement *Recognitiones*, in Rufinus's translation), purporting to record St Peter's words on the creation story thus far. Bede states: ›I wanted to insert these things into my work, briefly, so that the reader may understand how far this is in accordance with the sense of the Fathers‹.

42 Biographical details of Angelomus are patchy. For a large-scale study of Angelomus see CANTELLI 1990. As constructed by Gorman he flourished between 825 and 855, active especially at Luxeuil but with some connections to the palace at Aachen, GORMAN 1999, 563–564.

43 ANGELOMUS *In Genesin*, 115, 117. Angelomus goes on to state that ›Nos quidem beati Augustini, prout prius inservimus, dicta sequi decrevimus. [We indeed, have decided to follow the words of blessed Augustine, as we honoured [him] earlier]‹. This reference to Augustine is not connected in any way to the question of oil upon water, but refers to Angelomus's earlier comments on the creation of light and the creation of angels.

44 *Glossa Ordinaria*, 10, exegesis on ›Fiat Lux‹: ›But if it is asked where that light was made,





This is almost word for word the version of the passage to be found in Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and is similarly close to that used by Andrew of St Victor. The words are close to Bede's discussion in his *Genesis Commentary*, which was, presumably, the source for this gloss, through his Carolingian commentators, especially Rabanus Maurus.⁴⁵ Literature on the biblical gloss is vast and difficult to chart, but it was almost certainly Gilbert the Universal who compiled the gloss on the Pentateuch.⁴⁶ The adaptation of Bede's words in the current context fits the general approach adopted Gilbert and his fellow glossators, perhaps best expressed by Margaret Gibson: »The 12th century editors of the Glossed Bible are the heirs and executors of this Carolingian tradition ... They adapted their various patristic and Carolingian sources to the glossed page by abridgement, by the intercalation of new material, and by importing named quotations from Origen, Isidore and other ancient writers whom the original commentators had not quoted in that form, nor referred to by name«.⁴⁷ The *Genesis* commentary within the *Glossa Ordinaria* is complex, and a treasure-trove of sources, more, probably, than any other biblical book: Augustine, Isidore, Jerome, Bede, Paterius, Alcuin, Origen and John Chrysostom.⁴⁸ Lesley Smith notes a surprising lack of reference to Ambrose's *Exameron*, but this, she suggests, is perhaps because so much of this work had been absorbed into Bede.⁴⁹ Such use of Pliny as there is within the *Glossa Ordinaria* commentary is taken from Bede, and related to the four rivers rising from Paradise.⁵⁰ The passage concerning men with oil in their mouths would seem to bear out such reliance on Bede on the part of Gilbert the Universal.

As noted above, the fact that Peter Lombard, in his *Sentences*, includes the passage speaks more to its contemporary identification as one difficult of interpretation. The same could be said of its presence in Andrew of St Victor's commentary on *Genesis*.⁵¹ Beryl Smalley characterised Andrew's exegetical style as one where he chose to »expound, not the whole text but select passages, to pick out only those which presented special interest or difficulty ... a well

since the abyss covered all the heights of the earth, it is clear that it was made in those parts over which now shines the daily light of the sun. And it is not strange that the light can shine through the waters, since these are often lit even by sailors; diving in the deep, they make light for themselves in the water by spouting oil from their mouths. And the waters were much less deep in the beginning than they are now because they had not yet been gathered in one place.«

45 GIBSON 1992, ix.

46 ANDRÉE 2008, 111, n. 10.

47 GIBSON 1992, ix.

48 SMITH 2009, 44.

49 SMITH 2009, 45.

50 SMITH 2009, 45.

51 ANDREAS DE SANCTO VICTORE *In Genesim*, 1,3, 10: »Cum uero quaeritur ab his ubi facta sit *lux* ista corporalis, cum abyssus omnem terrae altitudinem tegeret, repondent, quia in illis partibus, quas nunc illustrat solis diurna lux; nec mirum lucem in aquis posses splendere, cum etiam nautarum operatione saepius illustrantur, qui in profundo mersi – misso ex ore oleo – aquas sibi illustrant. Quae multo rariores, quam sint modo, fuere in principio, quia nondum in unum locum congregatae.«





established tradition going back to the patristic *scholia*.⁵² The treatment of Genesis also privileges the literal interpretation over any other sense, a mode of interpretation that perhaps explains his engagement with the passage under question. Hugh of St Victor, by contrast, does not use or discuss the analogy of the action of light and men in deep water emitting oil from their mouths.

The image of oil upon the water as used by Basil, is, as Blomfield Jackson observed, strange. Exactly what practice Basil was referring to is unclear. That Ambrose adopted and modified it with the possible help of Pliny serves to underline his independence from Basil, or at least his ability to read and expound him critically. The genre of Hexaemeron commentary can be shown to be less repetitive than often thought. Some suggestions have been made as to the sources and chronology of this image that seems to have puzzled editors of Basil and Ambrose. Bede's use of the analogy highlights an increasingly critical approach to his patristic authorities. Despite the wide range of contact between Northumbria and the Mediterranean in Bede's lifetime and in those of his immediate forebears, not least Benedict Biscop, founder of his monastery, differences existed between his world and that of his authorities. We can assume with this evidence, if it were not enough to follow the dictates of common-sense, that sea-diving in the North Sea was a little-practised pastime or profession, with or without oil in one's mouth. Nevertheless it is to the Fathers that Bede turned primarily for guidance and understanding in his intellectual and theological life. There may be elements of silent criticism in his use of Basil and Ambrose, but both were authorities whose stature Bede would not question or diminish even if making sense of them was sometimes difficult. By the same token Bede enjoyed similar status amongst the commentators and exegetes of the mid-twelfth century, where, in the midst of the considerable activity devoted to compilation, understanding, stream-lining and questioning of inherited authoritative traditions, the passage on oil on the waters was found worthy of inquiry. That it does not appear to have been deemed so amongst generations subsequent to the mid-twelfth century, perhaps speaks to changes in intellectual taste and priority, and where hexaemeral commentary moved in different directions.

Hexaemeral commentary in both the early church and the Western Middle Ages may have borne the general characteristics of conservatism that Robbins identified. It is certainly the case that authors who wrote in this genre were powerfully aware of their status as inheritors of a tradition. In the medieval West, for example, hexaemeron writers knew the tradition of commentary and the canon of authorities perhaps better and more completely than any other. There are good reasons also as to why a conservative and derivative approach made sense. The six days of creation was a topic too important and central to sustain or allow much latitude in interpretation. Patristic commentators lived under the shadow of Origen's interpretations that gave so great a place to

52 SMALLEY, 1983, 120.





allegorical as opposed to literal readings. A cautious and literal approach seems to have been inherited by most medieval authors.

However, as the extended case study above demonstrates, close reading of these texts and authors reveals a more nuanced situation. Even within the constraints of the genre and the need to present the material as carefully and un-contentiously as possible, patristic and medieval exegetes find ways to express differences of opinion and emphasis. Original thinking, and criticism, manage to find their way into hexaemeral commentary. The very character of the hexaameron makes it an important location for examining the nature of exegetical instincts within both Patristic and medieval theological culture, as well as for understanding the contexts in which originality and critical reception of authorities were able to operate. The image of oil upon the waters as an explanation for the action of newly created light, may offer under closer scrutiny an invitation to re-assess a whole, and eminently significant exegetical genre.





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